

Text: Joshua 3:1-17
Theme: I will not cross the Jordan alone
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When I was a little boy, I lived with my parents in a city very close to a park which used to be a burial ground. At the time when I was in primary school, the burial ground had been turned to a park where school children and adults at various times played football. At night, it was sparsely lit. A few times when I had to cross the park to our house in the evening, I was often afraid that ghosts would appear to me and harm me. So, I always waited until I saw an elderly person, and I would walk behind him as a sort of cover. I could not walk that stretch of land alone at night, because I did not know what lay ahead.

The Hebrews did not know what lay ahead. Their only reconnaissance had come from the exaggerated reports of a few spies. Not only did they face the Jordan River at flood stage; but on the other side they would confront the walled cities of fierce Canaanite fighters.

God's ways are not always our ways. Indeed, God often delights in putting us in impossibly difficult circumstances so we learn a simple lesson. We can't get to the other side in our own strength. Sometimes God places us in circumstances where we have to throw our hands up and say: "I can't cope with this"; "I can't cope with another baby"; "I can't cope with my job"; "I can't cope with leading this Bible study..." or whatever it is that God's called you to do. And God's answer is often: "I know you can't – not on your own. But my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). And the more proud and self-reliant we are, the more painful that lesson is going to be when God summons us for a real-life tutorial. And so when you're on the edge of a flooded jungle swamp and God says, "Ok, it is time to cross over, it is time to trust and obey" do you look at the realities before your eyes and say: "utter madness; you must be joking"?

For the ancient Hebrews and for us, faith then becomes critical. Faith is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Faith is being willing to venture with God, blindfolded. At Joshua's commissioning, God repeatedly exhorted Joshua, "Be strong and courageous" (Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18). God called Joshua to lead Israel into the land that he had promised Israel's ancestors. God promised that He would go with Joshua. God promised Joshua success. But promises still required action. If Joshua was to experience the fulfilment of God's promises, he had to muster up the courage to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Why courage? C. S. Lewis captured the crucial role that courage plays when he wrote, "**Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at its testing point.**" **Courage is the initial step in the journey that connects the dots between God's promises and their fulfilment.**

A question to ask ourselves is whether we possess the courage to act to create the future that God desires to unfold through the work of God's people. Imagine how our lives would be different if they were marked by the strength and courage of Joshua?

Instructions for crossing the Jordan River

(vv. 1-2) Camping by the Jordan.

Israel faces up to their own utter helplessness to accomplish what it set before them. God told the people of Israel to wait three days at shores of the Jordan River (Joshua 1:11). All that time, the people of Israel saw a rushing river, swollen with spring rains lying in front of them. They must have asked, "How can we ever cross this river?" because once a year at harvest time, just like the River Nile, the River Jordan became a raging torrent that burst its banks. And so in flood season, on each side of the main river channel, was a flooded jungle swamp land.

(vv. 3-5) The Ark of God will lead the way.

"When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions..." (Joshua 3:3). Joshua didn't send his Army Corps of Engineers first. Instead, he sent the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, which was the **visible representation of God's presence with the people**. Joshua knew this was a spiritual problem, not a feat of human engineering.

Consecrate yourself – set yourself apart from common things in order to focus on the LORD, and to see that the LORD will do wonders among you. Because this would be a spiritual battle, Joshua requires that the people have a spiritual preparation.

So the first way the Lord prepares his people is to get them to focus on His presence among them. Look with me at v2:

"After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it." (Joshua 3:2-3) The Lord prepared His people firstly by getting them to focus on His presence, and then secondly in verse 5, by getting them to reflect on His teaching about salvation and redemption.

But then in verse 4, the NIV doesn't follow the order of the Hebrew text. More closely to the original, verse 4 reads: "Only there is to be a distance of about 2/3 of a mile; don't go near it, in order that you know the way in which you are to go".

In chapters 3 & 4 you can't get away from the Ark of the Covenant. Overall, it is directly mentioned 17 times in these two chapters alone. So what was the Ark? Well, it was the visible symbol of The Lord's presence - the place where the Infinite Creator of the universe physically manifested Himself and dwelt among His people. In times of great stress and anxiety about the future, God's people need constant reminders of the Lord's presence among them. And so we've got 17 such reminders in these chapters. But what's the function of the Lord's presence in verses 2-4? Well, listen again to verse 4: "Only there is to be a distance of about 2/3 of a mile; don't go near it, in order that you know the way in which you are to go".

When you're driving along a motorway you get lots of signs don't you? Signs telling you what's coming up at the next junction, or those new digital signs that tell there's heavy traffic on the M18 or whatever. But if you get too close to the sign before you spot it, you can't read it properly and you might miss your junction completely.

And that's the function of the ark here in verse 4. When the Lord was leading his people out of Egypt, through the Red sea and on towards the Promised Land, He manifested himself in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And that's how the Lord led and directed His people. It's like a sort of giant moving motorway signpost. And that's what the Lord is doing here in verse 4. It's both a reassuring symbol of the Lord's presence. But it's also a challenging signpost telling them that He really did want them to cross the Jordan and move on to take possession of the Promised Land. So the Lord prepares His people for the task ahead firstly in verses 2-4 by focusing their attention on His presence; a presence that gave reassurance and direction.

(v. 6) Joshua's step of faith - He sends the priests to walk across a swollen river Jordan.

"Take up the Ark of the Covenant and pass on ahead of the people" (Josh 1:6). We should assume that God told Joshua to do this, and that he wasn't working out of foolish presumption.

We see Joshua's success depending on and growing out of the promise of Joshua 1:8: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." Joshua obviously had the Word of God on his lips, on his mind, and in his actions.

(vv. 7-8) God's encouragement to Joshua.

Remember the tall order Joshua has been called to take on: To step into Moses' shoes and lead God's people; To carry on where Moses left off when he died just outside the Promised Land; And now Joshua's about to lead his troops through the Jordan at the worst time of the year. And the question is, would the people follow Joshua as they'd followed Moses? 'Was Joshua God-endorsed in the way Moses was?', they might have been thinking at the time. 'Can we trust this chap to lead us properly?' And the Lord says to Joshua: 'I know how you're feeling; how you feel you can never live up to Moses' legacy. I know all about the mutterings in the congregation; I know what some people are saying about you, questioning whether you're up to the job and all that. So be encouraged: I really have called you; Moses was simply my servant and now you're my servant. And I will publicly establish and confirm your leadership among the people so there's no doubt. Don't fear the people; be strong and courageous; fear me; trust and obey me and leave me to worry about getting the people to follow you.'

So the Lord encourages Joshua in verse 7, and then in verse 8 he encourages the people.

The priests carrying the ark are told to go up to the river carrying the ark and wade into it. And as soon as they do, as soon as their feet touch the water, the river will be cut off upstream. It seems like madness. The ark was heavy. They could be washed away by the current. Would they trust God and do what seems like a crazy thing?

But even if they got to the other side, they'd have an ever bigger challenge: to take on the fortified city of Jericho and then drive out all the well-armed inhabitants of the Promised Land: the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites.

And so what God's basically saying in verses 9-13 is this: 'I'll get you through the Jordan just as I've promised, but against all human odds. And that will give you the confidence to trust the rest of my promises for the future: the promise that I really will drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land so you can move in and take it over.'

The impossible problems in their way are not seen as an oppressive trial, but as a glorious opportunity to see God work.

But, just like the Israelites, we need to act on the basis of those promises. We need to step out in obedience and take hold of what's been promised because, if we disobey the Lord's commands then, as we see in the rest of Joshua and the Old Testament, we'll personally forfeit the promised blessings. The Lord always keeps His promises to His people. But His people are defined by those who have faith in him and his promises. So let me ask you: are you one of His people? Are you trusting in the Lord's promise of forgiveness and salvation; in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ alone? And even if you are, what else is the Lord challenging you about in your Christian life? What issue of obedience is He putting His finger on this morning? Are there areas in your life you're not fully trusting Him? Because there is no excuse. He has provided every encouragement we need. The Lord encourages His people then, both the leaders and everyone else.

Crossing the Jordan River.

Who knows how long the priests stood there in the river? It might have been a moment, or it may have been a long time - but in a situation like that, a moment seems like a long time! We usually want the river to be dry before we even make a step but God was truly calling Israel to step out in faith.

(v. 15) "For the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest" (NKJV). Joshua reminds us that this was not a time when the Jordan was reduced to a trickle. Because of the spring rains, at this time of early harvest, the river was swollen and overflowing its banks.

(vv. 16-17) The Jordan is stopped and the people cross over on dry ground.

"The waters which came down from upstream stood still" (NKJV). In some miraculous manner, God stopped the flow of the Jordan River. He may have used a natural occurrence (an earthquake has often been suggested), but the timing of it was at the hand of God.

This miracle obviously connects with the miracle the nation knew some 40 years earlier: the passing through the Red Sea. God brought them out of Egypt's bondage with a miracle, and He brought them into the Promised Land with a miracle.

How did it happen? What was the key to this amazing miracle? Notice the centrality of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. **The ark is referred to 14 times in these 17 verses. This was all about the trust that Joshua, the priests, and Israel had in the God they knew was present with them.**

Jesus is the fulfilment of the ark; He is Immanuel, which is translated, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Jesus has cleared the way to victory over all things: "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He

made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross" (Colossians 2:15). As we keep our eyes on Him, and follow behind our victorious Jesus, the river of impossibility will dry up.

God kept His promise because God always keeps His promises. But the challenge for God's people then and now is to trust and obey Him in the light of those promises, even when those promises and commands seem out of this world. And when we're tempted to doubt that, let's remember Joshua and the Jordan. Let's remember that no obstacle is too big for the Lord to overcome.

A story is told of a ship that was being tossed by a storm and people were rushing to grab their life-jackets. While the ship crew started helping people, they found a boy sitting in a corner in the deck enjoying an ice-cream. A crew-member asked the boy, "Are you not afraid we are in trouble?" Quick came the reply, "Why should I be afraid when my dad is the captain of the ship? He will surely steer us to safety". Make God the captain of your life. He will steer you through the darkest nights.

And so as we close let me ask you again: **Are you trusting God as you should, not just for your salvation, but in the details of life in this world too?** Let's have a few moments of quiet reflection before I close in prayer. Let's pray.

Closing Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you that you are totally sovereign, not just over the universe you created but also over all the details of our everyday lives. Help us to trust your promises for the future, knowing that you've made every necessary preparation and provide us with every encouragement we need. Help us to focus on your presence through the Holy Spirit and to reflect on your teaching, so that we might trust you more fully and praise you more joyfully. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.